



Iran Update, December 16, 2023

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The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates regularly based on regional events. For more on developments in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Key Takeaways:

1. The Israel Defense Forces concluded its probe into the accidental killing of three hostages by an IDF unit in Shujaiya.
2. Mossad Direct David Barnea met with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman al Thani to begin negotiations to free additional hostages.
3. Hamas fighters are attacking IDF units near Juhor ad Dik likely from Hamas' relative safe haven in the Gaza Strip's Central Governorate.
4. Israeli forces continued clearing operations in Shujaiya, Jabalia, and Sheikh Radwan.
5. Palestinian fighters continued their attempts to resist Israeli forces as the IDF continued its advance in Khan Younis.
6. The al Quds Brigades conducted two indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip targeting Sufa, southern Israel.
7. Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters around Nablus. The al Qassem Brigades reiterated calls for militia attacks on Israeli forces and settlers in the West Bank.
8. Lebanese Hezbollah conducted six cross-border attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
9. An Iraq-focused journalist said that Iraqi Security Forces arrested Kataib Hezbollah (KH) and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba fighters in connection to the December 8 rocket attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad.
10. The Houthis refocused their attack campaign to target Israel directly rather than international shipping and may have concluded that they achieved their objective of halting shipping through the Red Sea.
11. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for three attacks against US forces in Syria.

Gaza Strip

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to launch and sustain a major ground operation into the Gaza Strip
- Degrade IDF material and morale around the Gaza Strip.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) concluded its probe into the accidental killing of three hostages by an IDF unit in Shujaiya on December 15.¹ The IDF said that three shirtless individuals, whom the IDF later identified as hostages, waving a white flag exited a building “several dozen meters” from an IDF position.² An IDF soldier immediately opened fire at the three individuals in contravention of the IDF’s standing orders that forbid shooting at surrendering individuals.³ The soldier’s fire killed two of the hostages and wounded a third. An IDF battalion commander gave an order to ceasefire. A different IDF soldier opened fire on the third wounded man in contravention to the direct ceasefire order, killing the man.

The Israeli defense minister and the IDF chief of staff took personal responsibility for the deaths of the three hostages.⁴ Halevi highlighted that both shooters violated the IDF’s standing order that forbids shooting at any individual raising a white flag and asking to surrender.⁵

Hamas continued its information operation blaming the Israeli ground operation for hostage deaths and framed hostage deaths in the context of the December 15 incident. This information operation aims to undermine support for the war in Israel and increase pressure on Israeli leaders to pursue a ceasefire. Hamas official Osama Hamdan restated Hamas’ current negotiating position on December 16.⁶ The current position which forbids exchanging further hostages before the end of the Israeli ground operation.⁷ Hamdan said that Israel will not recover the hostages through the ground operation. Hamas posted a video called “time is running out,” showing hostages speaking before showing the dead body of one of those hostages.⁸ Hamas framed the video in the context of the IDF’s accidental killing of the three hostages on December 15. Hamas also published a graphic showing a hostage in a coffin with the caption “the choice is yours, whether in coffins or alive.” The group’s military spokesperson said that Israel is continuing to “gamble the lives of its soldiers” held hostage by Hamas. The spokesperson claimed that Israel “deliberately executed” the three hostages in the December 15 incident.⁹

Mossad Direct David Barnea met with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman al Thani to begin negotiations to free additional hostages.¹⁰ A source “familiar with the meeting” told an Israeli journalist that the talks are “just beginning” and the process of negotiations would be “long.” CIA Director William Burns and Egyptian intelligence head Abbas Kamal were “briefed” on the meeting and will help secure a new hostage deal, according to two sources familiar with the meeting between Barnea and Thani. It is notable in this context that Hamas’ current position is that no hostages will be exchanged before the end of the Israeli ground operation.

Hamas fighters are attacking IDF units near Juhor ad Dik likely from Hamas’ relative safe haven in the Gaza Strip’s Central Governorate. Multiple Hamas fighters raided the IDF’s combat outpost near Juhor ad Dik on December 16. The group claimed that it killed ten Israelis and posted a video showing its fighters, killing one IDF soldier.¹¹ Hamas and other Palestinian militias have conducted three raids against an IDF outpost

in the Juhor ad Dik area since December 3, which suggests Hamas and other Palestinian fighters are using the central Gaza Strip to launch operations against Israeli forces near Juhor ad Dik.¹² The IDF has not conducted clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip, and CTP-ISW has previously assessed that all four Hamas battalions in the central Gaza Strip remain combat effective.¹³ Both the al Qassem Brigades--Hamas' militant wing--and the al Quds Brigades--Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)'s military wing--shelled Israeli positions near Juhor ad Dik on December 16.¹⁴

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in Shujaiya, Jabalia, and Sheikh Radwan on December 16. Israeli forces finished clearing the Kamal Adwan Hospital in Jabalia on December 16. The IDF said that Hamas used the hospital as a military compound.¹⁵ The IDF recovered RPGs, explosives, and intelligence material. Israeli forces also detained 90 fighters in the area. Palestinian fighters continued to attack Israeli forces in Jabalia with small arms and anti-tank rockets.¹⁶ Hamas published a video showing a dead Israeli working dog in a Hamas tunnel in Sheikh Radwan on December 15. The group has continued to attack Israeli forces with rocket-propelled grenades, thermobaric rockets, and small arms in Sheikh Radwan.¹⁷ The commander of the 188th Brigade said that his brigade destroyed Hamas infrastructure and that it is currently clearing Shujaiya in a statement on December 16.¹⁸ Unspecified Palestinian fighters fired at 188th Brigade soldiers from a tunnel shaft near a school on Shujaiya. The IDF destroyed the tunnel shaft in response.¹⁹ Israeli troops also raided two schools in Rimal on December 16, killing 25 Hamas fighters and detaining 50 more.²⁰

Palestinian fighters continued their attempts to resist Israeli forces as the IDF continued its advance in Khan Younis on December 16. The al Qassem Brigades and al Quds Brigades shelled Israeli forces along the Israeli ground line of communication northeast of Khan Younis on December 15 in a combined operation.²¹ The al Qassem Brigades also used rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, other explosive devices to attack Israeli armor and other vehicles east of Khan Younis on December 16.²² The group fired rockets at Israeli infantry east of Khan Younis city on December 16, which it claimed killed one Israeli soldier. Hamas continued to resist Israeli forces north of Khan Younis.²³ Hamas' militant wing detonated one explosively-formed penetrator targeting an Israeli armored personnel carrier north of Khan Younis city.²⁴

The al Qassem Brigades conducted a complex, multi-stage ambush targeting Israeli forces east of Khan Younis on December 16.²⁵ The brigades' fighters detonated two anti-personnel improvised explosive devices (IED) targeting seven Israeli infantrymen east of the city. An Israeli quick reaction force (QRF) responded to the initial ambush. The al Qassem Brigades fighters ambushed the QRF by detonating a third anti-personnel IED. Hamas' militant wing claimed that both attacks killed and injured Israeli soldiers.

The IDF said that it raided apartments in Khan Younis on December 16.²⁶ The IDF's 4th Brigade Combat Team discovered weapons and underground infrastructure in the complex.

The al Quds Brigades conducted two indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip targeting Sufa, southern Israel, on December 16.²⁷ Palestinian militias conducted no other attacks targeting Israel on December 16.

West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters around Nablus on December 16. Palestinian fighters conducted three small arms attacks and three IED attacks in Nablus refugee camps.²⁸ The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades—the self-proclaimed militant wing of Fatah—claimed two of the small arms attacks and one of the IED attacks.²⁹ The group also claimed an attack on Israeli forces near Tulkarm.³⁰

The al Qassem Brigades reiterated calls for militia attacks on Israeli forces and settlers in the West Bank on December 15.³¹ Al Qassem Brigades spokesperson Abu Obeida released a statement in which he called for Palestinians to fight Israeli forces and settlers in the West Bank.³² Obeida stated that Israel “seeks to kill our people everywhere” and that Palestinians have a duty to confront Israel.³³ Obeida had threatened on December 10 that Hamas would conduct additional terror attacks against Israeli civilians.³⁴ Hamas and the al Qassem Brigades have repeatedly called for an uprising and mobilization in the West Bank but have received little response, as CTP-ISW previously reported.³⁵

The IDF did not acknowledge that Israel forces conducted overnight raids in the West Bank on December 16. The Palestinian Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners' Affairs Authority, which is part of the Palestinian Authority, said Israeli forces arrested 16 Palestinians, however.³⁶

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) conducted six cross-border attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on December 16.³⁷ LH launched two attack drones at Israel forces near Margalioth.³⁸ The IDF intercepted one drone but the other struck a group of Israeli soldiers, killing one and wounding two.³⁹ LH last claimed a drone attack that injured Israeli forces on December 10.⁴⁰ LH has only claimed eight drone attacks on Israeli positions along the Lebanese border since the Israel-Hamas war began, although the IDF frequently intercepts “suspicious” aerial targets originating from Lebanon.⁴¹ LH filmed the December 16 drone attack with multiple cameras and released a polished propaganda video.⁴² LH frequently posts video compilations of its attacks on Israeli communications and military infrastructure but usually without the production quality shown in this most recent video.⁴³ The rising quality of LH's videos and map graphics indicate that LH operations are increasing in professionalism along the Israel-Lebanon border, which could drive recruitment

Separately, LH conducted two consecutive attacks on Israeli infantry at the Birkat Risha site along the Lebanon-Israel border.⁴⁴ LH conducted three other attacks on IDF positions using rockets and unspecified munitions on December 16.⁴⁵

The United States and a regional security source speaking to CNN said that Israel has struck Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) positions 34 times since October 7.⁴⁶ Biden administration officials have conveyed to Israel that the strikes on LAF positions are unacceptable. A senior US official said that some of the strikes were clearly accidental, while the purpose of other strikes was not clear. UNSC Resolution 1701 permits the LAF to have a military presence south of the Litani river near the Israeli border but prohibits LH presence.⁴⁷

Iran and Axis of Resistance

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Demonstrate the capability and willingness of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to escalate against the United States and Israel on multiple fronts
- Set conditions to fight a regional war on multiple fronts

An Iraq-focused journalist said that Iraqi Security Forces arrested Kataib Hezbollah (KH) and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba fighters on December 14 in connection to the December 8 rocket attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad.⁴⁸ A senior Iraqi security official told the journalist that the militias "crossed lines" and that the situation is "serious."⁴⁹ CTP-ISW previously reported that the ISF arrested militia members on December 14, but the Iraqi government did not specify to which militia the fighters belonged.⁵⁰ The Iraqi central government has previously arrested KH and KH-linked fighters. The Iraqi judicial system released the fighters on both occasions after armed Iranian-backed fighters stormed Baghdad's Green Zone. Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) raided a Kataib Hezbollah compound in June 2020, arresting 14 KH fighters.⁵¹ Then-Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi's government released the KH fighters after KH fighters—led by Iranian proxy and KH leader Abu Fadak al Muhammadawi—stormed the Green Zone.⁵² Kadhimi's government also arrested the commander of KH-affiliated Liwa al Tafuf in May 2021, but released the commander after 12 days.⁵³ The commander's arrest caused an armed standoff between PMF fighters and ISF units in the Green Zone.⁵⁴

The Houthis refocused their attack campaign to target Israel directly rather than international shipping on December 16 and may have concluded that they achieved their objective of halting shipping through the Red Sea. The Houthi spokesperson announced the group launched tens of drones targeting sensitive targets in Eilat, Israel, on December 16.⁵⁵ The spokesperson said that Houthi Movement Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi ordered the attack to achieve victory for the Palestinian people and that attacks on Israel will continue until Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip halts. US Central Command said that the USS *Carney* shot down 14 attack drones launched as a drone wave from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen in the Red Sea.⁵⁶ Egyptian air defenses also intercepted a "flying object" in the Gulf of Aqaba near Eilat.⁵⁷ British warship HMS *Diamond* intercepted a single attack drone it suspected of targeting merchant shipping in the Red Sea on December 16.⁵⁸ The Houthis did not claim to target commercial shipping on December 16, however.

The Houthi anti-shipping campaign has likely achieved its desired effect for the moment. Two additional shipping giants, Swiss-based MSC and the French shipping group CMA CGM, suspended their ships' transit through the Red Sea on December 16 after the Houthi attacks. Major international shipping companies, such as Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd, had responded on December 15 to the Houthi attacks by pausing their operations through the Red Sea and routing ships instead around Africa.⁵⁹ Maersk alone accounts for roughly 17 percent of global shipping.⁶⁰ The Houthis have conducted almost daily drone and missile attacks against commercial vessels transiting the Bab al Mandeb since December 9. The most recent attacks occurred on December 15, when the Houthis struck two vessels off the coast of Yemen.⁶¹ The Houthi military spokesperson framed these attacks as part of their ongoing attack campaign targeting all commercial maritime traffic headed to or affiliated with Israel and vowed to continue these attacks.⁶²

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for three attacks against US forces in Syria on December 16.⁶³ The Islamic Resistance

in Iraq claimed a single drone attack against US forces at the Rumalyn Landing Zone in Hasakah Province, Syria. The group has claimed at least five attacks on Rumalyn Landing Zone since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a single drone attack against US forces at US base Conoco Mission Support Site in northeastern Syria. The group has claimed at least 13 attacks on Conoco since the start of the war. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a single drone attack against US forces at al Omar oil field. The group has claimed at least four attacks on al Omar since the start of the war.

Iran is blaming Israel for the December 16 attack on a police station in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Iranian Interior Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi stated that Israel supports armed groups seeking to create insecurity in Sistan and Baluchistan Province during his visit to the site of the attack.⁶⁴ Vahidi subsequently repeated the accusation during his remarks at the funeral ceremony for the Law Enforcement Command (LEC) officers killed during the attack.⁶⁵ Iranian judicial authorities, furthermore, executed an unspecified individual in Sistan and Baluchistan Province they accused of cooperating with the Israeli Mossad to assist anti-regime militant groups in the province.⁶⁶ Jaish al Adl— a Balochi anti-regime group operating around the Iran-Pakistan border--conducted a two-stage attack targeting a police station in Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on December 15, killing 11 LEC officers.⁶⁷

Iran, China, and Saudi Arabia issued a joint statement calling for an immediate end to Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip on December 16 in Beijing.⁶⁸ The statement also called for the provision of humanitarian aid and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The statement follows the Iranian deputy foreign affairs minister's visit to Beijing on December 15 to discuss the Israel-Hamas war and the Iran-Saudi normalization process with his Chinese and Saudi counterparts.⁶⁹

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³ https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/halevi-says-that-he-and-idf-responsible-for-killing-of-3-hostages-in-gaza/
⁴ https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/one-of-the-most-tragic-incidents-ive-ever-known-gallant-says-hes-responsible-for-hostages-deaths/
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⁶ <https://twitter.com/SafaPs/status/1736075938968826240>;
<https://twitter.com/ajmubasher/status/1736084282886566241>
⁷ <https://twitter.com/SafaPs/status/1736075938968826240>;
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⁸ <https://t.me/hamasps/18431>
⁹ <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/885>
¹⁰ <https://www.axios.com/2023/12/15/israel-mossad-qatar-prime-minister-hostage-negotiations>
¹¹ <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/895>
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¹³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-order-of-battle-of-hamas-izz-al-din-al-qassem-brigades-part-1-north-and-central-gaza>
¹⁴ <https://t.me/sarayaps/16952>; https://t.me/Qsam_new/462
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<https://t.me/qassam1brigades/889>; https://t.me/Qsam_new/458
¹⁸ <https://www.idf.il/162810>
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²⁰ <https://x.com/idfonline/status/1735927881392386188?s=20>;
<https://twitter.com/GLZRadio/status/1735936951142752390>
²¹ HYPERLINK "https://t.me/Qsam_new/459"https://t.me/Qsam_new/459;
<https://t.me/QudsN/344572>
²² <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/877>; <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/876>;
<https://t.me/qassam1brigades/875>; <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/874>; <https://t.me/QudsN/344578>;
<https://t.me/QudsN/344597>
²³ <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/883>; <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/881>
²⁴ <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/880>
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³⁰ <https://t.me/alredalsrey/498>
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³⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-november-4-2023> ;
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³⁶ https://t.me/mihwar_almuqawama/42481
³⁷ https://t.me/C_Military1/41790 ; https://t.me/C_Military1/41793 ; https://t.me/C_Military1/41809 ;
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42 https://t.me/C_Military1/41868

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